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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000097

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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KU](#) [SUCCESSION](#)  
SUBJECT: AMIR'S DEATH: THE POLITICAL FALLOUT

REF: A. KUWAIT 93  
[B.](#) 05 KUWAIT 4933  
[C.](#) 05 KUWAIT 4372  
[D.](#) 04 KUWAIT 3580

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1.](#) (C) Summary and comment: The Amir's death on January 15 (ref A) was widely expected in Kuwait and is unlikely to have a significant impact on the country's political/economic direction or U.S.-Kuwaiti relations. As per the succession law, Crown Prince Shaykh Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, himself in very poor health, was automatically proclaimed the next Amir by the Council of Ministers. However, Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the de facto ruler of Kuwait since 2001, will continue to direct government policy for the foreseeable future. Some observers speculate that Shaykh Saad will abdicate the amirship to the Prime Minister in the coming weeks, formalizing Shaykh Sabah's political power. Given Shaykh Sabah's careful approach to succession issues, we do not predict that he will push for the Amir position in the near term. While the Amiri succession is unlikely to affect the distribution of power at the top, it could have a significant impact on the second-tier of Kuwaiti leaders in the appointments of a new Crown Prince and Prime Minister and a possible redistribution of ministerial portfolios. While the ultimate impact of the succession on Cabinet posts will depend on the people chosen to fill the vacant positions, post does not anticipate any scenario that would significantly affect U.S.-Kuwaiti relations. End summary and comment.

The Next Amir?

[2.](#) (C) The death of Shaykh Jaber Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of Kuwait since 1977, on January 15 was widely anticipated and is unlikely to have a major impact on the country's internal affairs, its external relations, or U.S. interests. Crown Prince Shaykh Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, who suffers from serious health problems himself, automatically became the next Amir as per the 1964 succession law. (Comment: In a recent meeting with former President George Bush, the Crown Prince was unable to speak, although he seemed cognizant of the President's presence, and was only able to stand with the support of his son and an aide. The Crown Prince suffered brain damage from excessive hemorrhaging brought on by colon disease in 2001. End comment.) Due to the Crown Prince's health condition, many embassy contacts predict Shaykh Saad will abdicate the amirship in favor of Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah in the coming weeks, if not sooner. However, Shaykh Sabah has been loathe to push for changes at the top. He has told an interviewer that there is no Kuwaiti tradition of "former" rulers and he appears comfortable exerting effective control, at least until now.

¶3. (C) While the Amiri succession is unlikely to significantly affect power at the top, it is expected to have a greater impact on the distribution of power in the Council of Ministers for two reasons. First, if Shaykh Saad abdicates in favor of Shaykh Sabah, the positions of both the Crown Prince and the Prime Minister would need to be filled. Since the leading candidates for the positions are currently top ministers, any appointment would necessitate replacing at least one minister and could result in a shift in ministerial portfolios. (Note: It is possible that the two positions, separated in 2003, will be reunited and given to one person. End note.)

¶4. (C) It is unclear, however, who might fill these positions, which may militate for Shaykh Sabah to continue to serve as PM even if named Crown Prince. The amirship has traditionally alternated between the Jaber and Salem branches of the Al-Sabah family; however, some contacts suggest this is merely an historical coincidence. There are, in fact, few potential candidates for either position from the Salem branch, although Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Al-Salem Al-Sabah, who has a Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard University, is a notable exception. Shaykh Dr. Mohammed, the leading figure among the younger generation of Al-Sabah, is considered by many to have the experience and vision necessary to lead Kuwait in the twenty-first century. One other (unlikely) candidate from the Salem branch is Shaykh Ali Salem Al-Ali Al-Salem Al-Sabah, the son of National Guard Chief Shaykh Salem Al-Ali and a former Minister of Communications and Minister of Finance; he does not currently hold a government position.

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¶5. (C) The other leading candidates for the positions of Crown Prince and Prime Minister are from the Ahmed line of the Jaber branch. One candidate is First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Shaykh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, though Dr. Ismail Al-Shatti (strictly protect), a former MP and an astute political analyst, told Polfoff recently that Shaykh Nawaf was "weak" and was "not a decision maker." Al-Shatti noted, however, that Shaykh Nawaf would be acceptable to the Salem branch due to his close relationship with Shaykh Saad. Another candidate is Deputy Chief of the National Guard Shaykh Mishal Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who Al-Shatti said would in any case be "the real strong man" behind Shaykh Nawaf if the latter was appointed to either position. Energy Minister Shaykh Ahmed Al-Fahd Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is also rumored to be a potential candidate. Shaykh Ahmed has expended considerable effort to build support both within the ruling family and among Kuwaiti society more broadly; however, at 42, many consider him too young for either position. Some contacts also question his commitment to reform and note that he has been implicated in several corruption scandals.

¶6. (C) The second reason ministerial portfolios could be affected by the Amiri succession is that the Salem branch may use Shaykh Saad's abdication as a bargaining chip in intra-family negotiations over the future distribution of power. Shaykh Salem Al-Ali, the leading Salem branch family member who provoked a public controversy and indirectly criticized the Prime Minister by calling for the creation of a three-member committee to "assist the leadership" with ruling the country (ref C), has long voiced the Salems' opposition to the Jabers' consolidation of political power. (Note: Four of the sixteen Cabinet positions are currently held by Jabers, while only one is held by a Salem. End note.) Shaykh Salem Al-Ali and other leading Salems are unlikely to quietly acquiesce to Shaykh Saad's abdication without getting something - most likely ministerial portfolios - in return.

## Impact on U.S. Interests

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17. (C) The Amir's death is unlikely to significantly affect U.S. interests in Kuwait or U.S.-Kuwaiti bilateral relations.

Even if Shaykh Saad remains as Amir for an extended period of time, Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah will continue to direct the Government of Kuwait's policy on important issues. Even a shift in key ministerial portfolios is unlikely to have a major impact on Kuwait's commitment to the primacy of its relationship with the U.S.

## Kuwaitis Mourn for Honored Amir

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18. (SBU) Shaykh Jaber Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of Kuwait for nearly 28 years, led the country through some of its most tumultuous periods, including the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. He also presided over an unprecedented period of economic prosperity, which contributed to Kuwait's emergence as a regional economic player. His foresight in investing oil revenues in the unique Fund for Future Generations proved critical in his efforts to garner international support for the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991. Shaykh Jaber was also a strong supporter of women's suffrage legislation, which he introduced by amiri decree to the National Assembly in 1999; initially rejected by Parliament, women were finally given full political rights in May 2005.

19. (SBU) Shaykh Jaber reportedly married more than 30 times and has an estimated - sources differ - 23 sons and 15 daughters. He was born in 1928. Kuwaiti contacts remember him fondly as a good Amir who led Kuwait through times of both feast and famine. Although his death is not unexpected, Kuwaitis we have spoken with today are deeply saddened and moved by the loss of a ruler widely loved and honored for his generosity and humility.

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